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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a snapshot of the language used by two outdoor instructors and analyzes its therapeutic components. Following an experience of abseiling with an instructor friend (Tony), Tony's instructional dialogue with the author and his sons during the experience was written down and put aside. A year later, a surfing coach (Mark) was observed to be using the same sort of language while giving instruction to children on the beach. For the next 3 weeks, Mark's lessons were observed, and his language was recorded and compared to Tony's. Analysis of the directions, prompts, and feedback given by the instructors shows that the instructional aims of each language episode were complemented by therapeutic features. Examples of instructor speech are given that demonstrate the following therapeutic components: developing empathetic communication and understanding between instructor and student, encouraging students to confront self-doubt, building student self-confidence, supporting students' assumption of responsibility as they move out of the novice stage, and debriefing student accomplishments. The language "in-use" displayed by these instructors is quite similar to that used in counselling approaches recommended by Rogers, Glasser, and Egan and suggests the instructors' role as change agents with regard to personal development and self-esteem. (Contains 23 references.) (SV)

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Scared Spitless: The Therapeutic Power of Language

By Phil Fitzsimmons & Tony Elshof

The Story Begins, Ethnography in Paradise?

> We have a name that we use for noticing without being sure of the exact cues, the details that might be offered as evidence. We tend to call that intuition. Most of what is called intuition is processed subliminally, unconsciously. "Mere" intuition is not very respectable, like "mere" metaphor. Yet even thought the boundaries of analysis will be pushed further; it is a mistake to discard the hints and suspicions that are not accounted for by a given paradigm (Bateson 1994, p.141)

Over they went. Stephen was seven years old and Tim was eleven. No problem for them, the problem was that I was next. The kids had harangued Tony for years to take them abseiling and out of the blue he had knocked on our door, bundled us into the car and taken us to the summit of Mount Keira. This was a lot different to the climbing gym. I'd never said anything about going with them. I kept thinking, How'd I get roped into this? No pun intended. It wasn't the fifteen-metre ledge that we were going over that made me slightly nervous. It was the sheer several hundred metre, lethal, rock strewn and vulture inhabited drop just beyond that made me a little apprehensive. Okay, so there were no vultures but it was still along way down.

As an ageing ethnographer whose primary research interest was language, I couldn't help but listen to Tony and Kevin as they "tied up" to the thin looking, craggy, ageing tree above the cliff strapped us into our harness and edged us to the cliff face. Well, edged me to the cliff face; the boys couldn't wait to leap to their deaths.

Besides the instructions and new vocabulary I thought I'd detected something else in the language that seemed to me to go in one ear and out the other. The boys had simply nodded knowingly. It was an edge (once again no pun intended), a handle or something that seemed to stifle my gnawing apprehension. As I lumbered over the edge Tony told me where to put my hands, to stop clinging to the cliff face and lean back. Lean back! All I wanted to do was lean forward and dig my fingernails into the solid rock.

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Both Tony and Kevin soothed my tangled nerves with words of encouragement. The boys laughed. However soon I was throwing myself over the edge with ease. I went backward, forward, using one hand and then no hands. Well, I actually slipped but it was still fun.

All afternoon the words that I had heard lingered in the back of my mind. That night I wrote a reflective recall of my death-defying defeats which included all the dialogue that I could remember. I stored it on an electronic ledge in the bowels of my computer as perhaps something to follow up. Certainly the language use was interesting but I was concerned that I had been suffering from the 'eye of the beholder' syndrome. The reflective jottings lay dormant in my computer for just over a year.

Lying on a beach in Queensland some time later, I heard a familiar tone. A learn-to-surf coach was giving instructions. Instructions that had a 'ring' that I had heard before. Mark's words had a resonating feel, the same quality that I had heard from Tony. For the next three weeks I observed Mark in action and took daily field notes. When I returned home and compared the notes and transcripts with the jottings from my "picnic at hanging rock" several key issues and themes seemed to emerge.

Personal Bias and Theoretical Perspective

> [T]he methodology of the constructivist is very different from the conventional inquirer ...[it] is iterative, interactive, hermeneutic and at times intuitive and certainly open ... [I]t makes demands of its own so heavy that anxiety and fatigue are the constructivist's most constant companions. It is a different path, one strewn with boulders, but one that leads to an extravagant and hitherto virtually unappreciated rose garden. (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p.183)

Before discussing the heart of this study we want to make clear the pitfalls of application; personal prejudice and theoretical slant and that formed the basis of this project. We acknowledge that this study:

- Is in its infancy and is very narrow in scope and scale. It represents a snapshot view of one of the alleyways of understanding that crop up in ethnographic research.
- Represents primarily the viewpoint of the instructors. For ethical and logistical reasons (which are in the process of being overcome and will form the basis of further analysis and research) this paper discusses the views of those who produced the 'language event' and not those who received the language.

The theoretical approach, which formed the power source of analysis, was the basic premises that underpin the field of sociolinguistics. These included our beliefs that language is:

- A social semiotic (Halliday, 1978). As such every expression carries with it both a private and public layer. Austin (1962) and Goffman (1974) argue that within the framework of vocalised language there are hidden layers or strata of meaning occurring simultaneously, providing a depth of textual arrangement from which communication becomes a meeting of minds rather than a transaction of words.
- Acting as a social semiotic, language is metaphor (Reik, 1948; MacCormac, 1986; Perrin, 1987). The definition of metaphor in these terms being the

encapsulation and transmission of "all our ideas, thoughts and behaviour" (Wheeler 1987, p.224).

- Is a power force in creating social and personal definitions (Kliebard, 1966; Smith and Geoffrey, 1968; Becker, 1974; Turner, 1978; Wells, 1985). Cohen and Younger (1983, p.175) are of the opinion language is the means through which we transmit an affective dimension, "not readily transcribed into literal terms".

Changing Intuition to Insight

An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society, which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity, will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water (Gardner 1961, p.16)

> The transformation of hunches into patterns and relationships began with a 'weeding out' or sorting of sequences of phenomenological sequences, resorting by defining the boundaries of closure and defining the language which has "...a particular configuration of meanings that is associated with a particular situation.... Considered in terms of the notion of meaning potential, the register is the range of meaning potential that is activated by the semiotic properties of the situation" (Halliday 1975, p.126).

The problem in this labelling process was the apparent 'wheels within wheels' process that was operating within the total structure of the context. In other words, we had to give voice to the ideology of the respondents before we could define the language practice, or link the theoretical and abstract concepts of meaning with the hard data of the field interactions.

The Therapeutic Components of "Language in Use"

Through the iterative process briefly described in the previous section several salient therapeutic language features seem to emerge running in tandem with the directions, prompts and feedback given by outdoor instructors. This dualistic process of instruction and counsel are represented schematically in the Figure 1. As represented by the double arrows, the process of instruction was a cyclical process of individualised instruction. As stated in an earlier paragraph the following illumination of therapeutic components are as yet only a one sided perspective using their terms.

Empathy.

> Kids, what I'm going to show you is just pure fun. But it takes practice and effort. Just like you I started on this beach. I went through he same stuff you going to. If you listen carefully we'll both get there. (Mark, Instructor)

> I know that it feels weird. Your brain is saying, this is not logical to jump off a cliff attached only to a rope. But if we can both slowly make our way down to the

bottom, I know that you will be straight back up here to do it again. (Tony, Instructor)

Besides the specific behavioural instructions that were given, (both the respondents of this study) 'Mark' sought a to identify with children in being able to reveal to the children in his care that he was capable of "getting inside their head," setting up a definite pathway of communication. Thus a relationship based on reciprocal understanding between the instructor and the children is developed from the outset. It would seem that Mark's (and Tony's) ideal is to create in the children's mind a belief that they are understood, cared for and that "everything is under control."

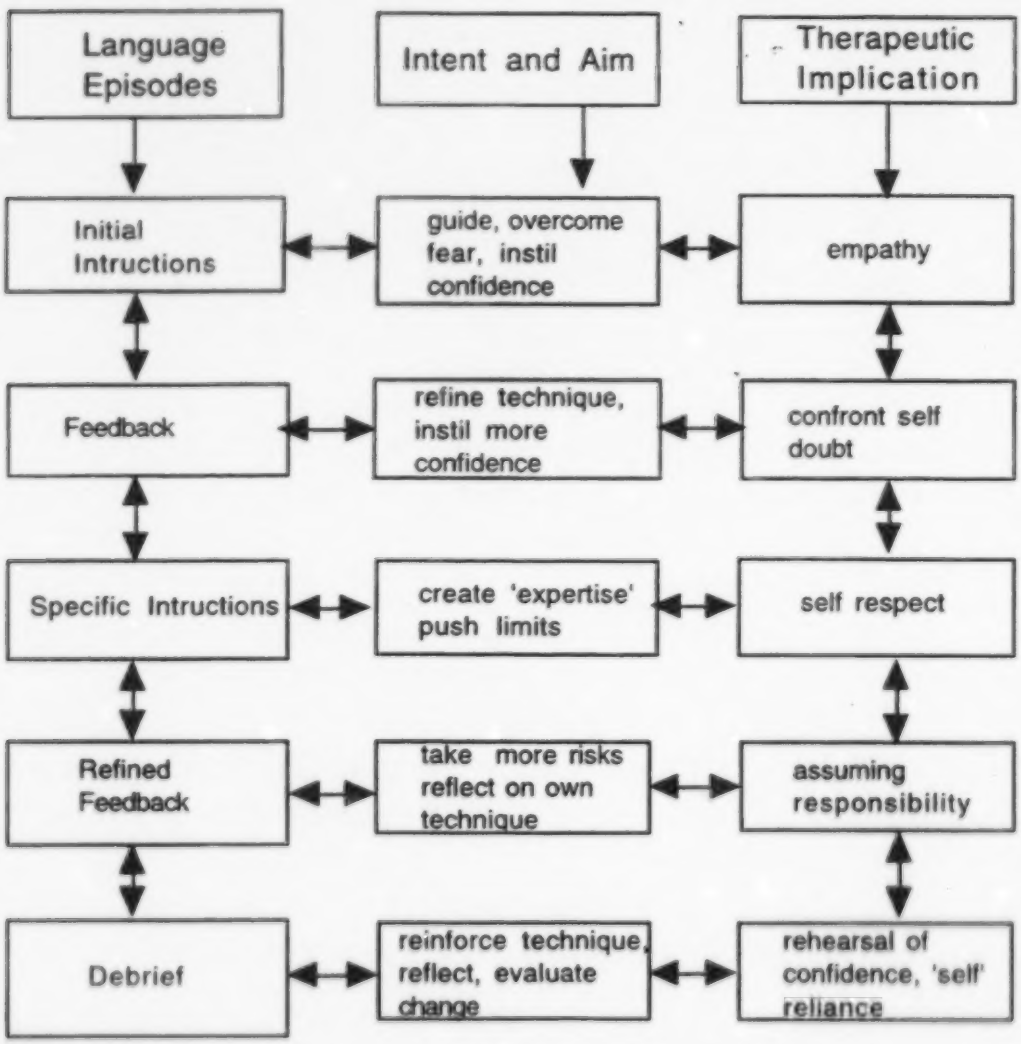

Figure 1. The relationship between language, instructor's intent and meaning potential.

The ideal behind this notion of empathy is more than just letting children know they are cared for and that the instructor has been there before and knows what they are going though. It would seem that the tacit understanding of both instructors is that the 'learners' in their care are actually embarking on a path of self exploration and that to facilitate this process an empathetic line of communication must established from the beginning of the program. Feeling free to interact with a teacher in a highly personal way, the children are able to find who they are, how they think and how they can form other relationships within the class.

This initial stage of self exploration sets in train the other complementary functions as well as initiating the cyclical linking of specific demonstrations with the 'giving off' of therapeutic understandings. Because the children feel comfortable and in a limited way believe their emotions and apprehensions are understood, they in turn are now able to begin to confront the environmental elements that awaits them. This initial pathway of language is similar to the optimum counselling component described by Carkuff (1969) and Egan (1977), who believe that empathetic understanding is the key to challenging people to display a reciprocal quality. It is more than verbalising feelings and emotions but is in essence a continuum of action, sending "... a message of respect, encouraging dialogue and collaboration in the helping process" (Egan, 1990, p.135).

Confronting Self Doubt.

> Come on Dan, forget that! You can do it. I fell off all the time on my first day too. My first month. I was the same age as you. Put your fingers right around the rails and your back foot further back. You're doing great. You can do it. Have a go. Get up into the break... (Mark, Instructor)

> It's ok to feel scared. We need to feel scared. Fear keeps us safe, it makes us careful. But now you have to take control of that fear, use it and make it work for you. You can go over that edge, you can do it. (Tony, Instructor).

Through this form of language the instructors in this project actively sought to engender an attitude of trust in themselves and also actively encouraged the children to "take a risk." In fact it could be stated that this is perhaps the cornerstone of the whole philosophical model they carry in their heads. It appears that when the children see they can 'simply have a go' without fear of ridicule and that, they become assertive in their own right breaking through barriers of self doubt. Recognising that their instructor is right there to offer encouragement, has been in their position before and that they are in a group that is undergoing the same learning experience seems to offer the necessary scaffolds to confront any feelings of "I can't do this." Most certainly all the children in Mark's surfing class all looked and listened when he spoke to individual children. It would seem that all took heart in not only his words of encouragement listened to his specific instructions but also tackled the waves with an increased vigour.

It would also seem that moving through this process day by day, listening to the instructions given to others promoted an increased sense of camaraderie and group cohesion. An atmosphere and sense of belonging to a community had been created wherein everybody has become coalesced into joint involvement and increased purpose (Dinkmeyer and Muro 1979).

Self Respect.

> Jules come and I'll show you where to put your feet and hands. ... Lie on the board, and move your hands up here, a little more. Your head goes here right on this black spot and when you jump up your feet a re spread about shoulder width apart. No, a little more. Now you do it without me having to bruise you. Great that's it; you've got it. You won't need me soon. You've got the idea of the timing it's just the technique. Go and try it. (Mark, Instructor)

> You're over the hardest part but you need to lean back a little more. Keep your feet shoulder width apart and stay strong in your legs. As you jump out let some rope slide through your hands, land softly and push off again. Remember, you're in control. (Tony, Instructor)

The language instructions, which had an apparent corresponding notion of "respect," are a multifaceted form. While it is language verbalised, it is also language demonstrated. More often than not when Mark was offering highly specific instructions they were also highly personalised which involved a great deal of invasion of personal space, touch and language that seemed on the surface to be simply encouraging. This form of language use seems to be the bridge between reliance on the instructor and taking ownership of the activity. It has elements of empathy combined with affirmations that each individual in the group is valued and now ready to take control for themselves. Quite often after a session like this on the beach or in the water there was an observable increase in enjoyment emanating from the children. They would smile, wave at their parents and initiate an animated discussion out in the water. "Nothing is a greater impediment to being on good terms with others than being ill at ease with yourself" (Elkins 1976:13).

Assuming responsibility.

> You nearly snapped one of the lips. Unreal! Keep your back a little more bent. Push down harder with your back foot and lean in to it. It won't bite its only water. You've got it now. You'll be on the circuit soon." (Mark, Instructor)

> You're doing really well. But let's concentrate on good form. Remember to relax and keep your jumps smooth and flowing. That's great, good jump...OK! (Tony, Instructor)

While this form of interaction was often associated with an increase in skill development it was also common to hear this form of language aimed at all the other members of the group. Taking control over their own actions and abilities, and pushing their mental and physical capabilities to the own personal limit appears to be not only the final key in moving students out of the initial novice stage, but also an integral force in moving them to higher skill levels.

It would seem that this form of language also elicited a series of questions from the student as opposed to simply taking advice. These questions were focussed on finer points of control and were periods of apparent intense reflection.

Debriefing.

> I'm not sure I guess what I was trying to get across to... These kids.... It was that they all went forward this afternoon. They all did something a whole lot better than yesterday. It was cold this arvo but no one gave up. They needed to hear that. (Mark, Instructor)

> I like to keep it simple. Get them thinking about "What impacted you the most?" and "What do you really think you learned out there today?" (Tony, Instructor)

Every surfing session with Mark ended with a group debriefing. They were all praised, each individual was given highly specific details on what they had accomplished and the group as a whole was given some form of explicit instruction and demonstration by Mark on the finer points of surfing. Although he has no theoretical understanding of the benefits of debriefing, he does believe that it is the "pulling together of all they've done" and sees it as a step towards self reliance and a "letting go of the apron strings."

Conclusion

As stated in the opening paragraphs this study is in its infancy and yet even the most cursory glance at any review of the literature related to the field of psychotherapy, reveals that the language "in-use" demonstrated by the instructors in this study is a key component in the counselling approaches recommended by Rogers (1959), Glasser (1976) and Egan (1990). Without even realising the importance of the tacit knowledge they put into practice within their fields of expertise, these instructors had become more than simply teachers of outdoor education but had seemingly become change agents in regard to personal development and self esteem. This has major implications for the way that outdoor educators interact with those in their care. It would seem that it is important that they remember Laings' (1967) entreaty, "I am presumably what they are describing, but not their description. I am the territory, what they say I am in their map of me..." (p.24).

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